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Charging the Hero

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Arc 5: Magic Parsing

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Day Before (1)

I'd always had a habit of losing sight of what was around me when I concentrated on one thing.

While I engrossed myself in play, it was often the case the day would be over before I realized it, and when I started studying to become a lawyer, I'd often spend whole nights grappling with my textbooks.

The good part of this personality was that once I concentrated on something, I could devote myself to it without giving the slightest care to anything else. I became a lawyer because of that, so I'm most satisfied.

The bad part of this personality is that, once I concentrate on something, I find myself unable to keep up with the flow of time, eating it away. Today, that had backfired.

After investigating the scene from start to finish, I had a meal at the restaurant in the hotel's basement.

Savoring an extravagant lunch worthy of a first-rate hotel, being the only customer in shop let me calmly sort through the incident.

Caring not for the restaurant chef's unpleasant face, I fished through documents until shop closed, finally finding myself driven away. Of course, after that, I continued grappling with papers at a café near the station, looking at the incident from various angles.

Whether there was any information I was lacking, whether there was anything I had to look into, whether I was overlooking something...

Was I really approaching the truth?

There was definitely worth in going to the crime scene. Because of this time's investigation, I was able to resolve various questions.

But new ones were born in their place.

The probability the victim was murdered on the 11th was high. But why? Why did Claudia come on the 10th? The letter that came to her house said the

demon lord would be there on the 10th, and even went on to specify a time.

... What meaning did that letter hold?

Claudia wrote in her diary she didn't know the intent behind the letter.

But to say the least, if that letter hadn't come, this incident would never have happened.

It was the start of it all. If the true culprit wasn't Claudia but someone else, the sender of that letter was definitely suspicious.

But I didn't have the means to identify who it was.

If I had to say another thing I didn't get, it was the end of last time's trial. Cate said she was going to call a witness in the next trial.

She intended to call him in the first place, but he refused so she found herself unable.

The difference between requesting testimony, and summoning a witness, was the presence of legal force.

When requesting testimony, you were only hearing out their opinions on the case, and they were able to decline.

But summoning someone as a witness was different. The summons was made in order to receive crucial testimony towards the resolution of a case, and it held the binding force of the law.

Of course, with such potency behind it, you needed an appropriate basis to summon a witness.

... Wanted to call them. But could not.

That meant they had advantageous testimony for the prosecution, but the individual had declined, so they wouldn't be coming to the stand.

There's no way that Cate would hide a witness with inconvenient testimony. Even if they were family, she was the type of person who'd gleefully search out their faults and crudeness.

Who did she plan on calling in the trial the day after tomorrow?

No matter how hard I thought, I couldn't come to an answer. More than that,

it only increased my questions.

Eventually, time passed, and I missed the last tram. The café wasn't operational at night, making it physically impossible to go home that night.

... There was no helping it. If it's come to this, I'll do it to the end.

I relied on the light over a park bench, reading over the case's material time and again after that, searching for what I could do.

Eventually, night closed, and I got on the first tram bound home.

Jessica Belliquese's call came the moment I stepped off, right as I was thinking to return home and take a nap.

'I-I'm back in Grimbeld. I took some photos, so please look at them.'

Could it be she's going to fall dead just like that? Her feeble breath and tone was enough for me to have such suspicions.

I promised to meet her at the café we met before, and went home. Throwing everything beside, I collapsed on top of the bed.

I was terribly tired. My sweat-stained shirt was leagues away from what you could call clean, but paying it no mind, I wanted nothing but sleep.

... When I next opened my eyes, a bright light streamed in diagonally from the window.

Looking at the clock, it was 8:45, fifteen minutes to my meeting with Jessica. Perhaps I was suffering from muscle pain, as I felt the pain of bones grating here and there.

I forced myself up, and took a shower. The hot water woke up my mind.

After that, I changed, took up my bag, and went out. The promised time had long since passed, but without any impatience, I headed for the appointed café.

... I should get her a cake.

I took a detour along the way, and a whole hour later than promised, I arrived at the café. Regardless of it being early morning, the shop was surprisingly crowded, but Jessica had yet to come.

... She's late, I put myself aside, and muttered in my heart.

Day Before (2)

“Dear sir? My apologies, but are you waiting for someone?”

The café’s master approached with a friendly attitude. I only ever used this place once, and I’m sure he’d already forgotten my face.

To the master with the expression of a good-natured old man, I responded, “Why yes, I am.”

“Truth be told, there’s been a woman outside the shop for a while now. Apparently, she’s waiting for someone as well...”

... Outside?

I stood, and left the café at once. On the main road, there were a few pedestrians passing by the café, but I couldn’t see Jessica anywhere.

“She was in the alley.”

I heard the master’s voice from behind, so I circled around to the store’s back. Right behind the shop was a dim alleyway, and there Jessica Belliquese snored as she slept like a log.

... What was she doing?

As she mumbled and turned, I approached her. Looking closely, she had properly laid out cardboard under herself.

“Oy, wake up.”

“Pgyaaah!”

I poked her forehead. There, Jessica raised a cry, and leapt up as she dribbled some drool.

“W-w-w-w-w-w-!” Her green hair was in a terrible bedhead. “Ah! Mr. Daniel! W-wwwhat is it!? What are you doing to a sleeping maiden!?”

“Nothing at all. And what about you? What are you doing here? Did you become homeless?”

“I’m not!” Despite having just woken up, with strangely good complexion,

Jessica gave a hollow laugh of, “Ehehehe.”

“My house is quite far from here. It’s a pain to keep going back and forth, so for now, I decided to wait here until you came, Mr. Daniel!”

... Wait, she was sound asleep.

“But I properly told the café’s master, that I was waiting for someone. I asked him to bring them over here if they came.”

I’m sure the master didn’t really mind if it was just a meeting point and agreed. There’s no doubt he never thought she’d fall sound asleep in front of the store.

It wasn’t hard to imagine the troubles laying under that good-natured face.

“More importantly, Mr. Daniel! Just what is the meaning of this!?” Jessica bounced to her feet, her bedhead swaying as she stood. “I almost died there! Like this, a hundred thousand gold isn’t nearly enough!”

“You want to haggle?”

When I said that, Jessica enthusiastically answered “Yes, raise please.”

“Sure,” I answered. And added on, “How does a hundred and fifty thousand sound?”

“Wait, really!? Hooray!”

“Haha, don’t mind it. Then won’t you return the fifty thousand gold I sent you at once?”

“Eh? Eh?”

Jessica had just jumped for joy, taking up a pose, but she froze for a moment. A cold sweat dripped down from her neck.

“Um, that was, see, a necessary expense, or rather...”

“Hahahaha, what are you talking about? You’re a freelance mercenary, right? When did you become a full-time employee?”

I tapper her shoulder. “I’ll deduct it from your reward. So what I’ll pay you is a hundred thousand,” I said as I returned to the café.

From behind, I heard a pitiful voice of, “sweatshop lawyer...” from behind, but I didn’t particularly pay it any mind.

Day Before (3)

“You’re terrible.Terrible.”

Returning to my seat Jessica tottered behind, with her mouth in a deep-set frown.

As always, she wore her yellow coat and showy sword at her hip, but looking closely, they were even dirtier than when I last saw her.

Her pale legs had become swollen and red here and there, her coat had something like dirt stuck onto it. While its yellow was still yellow, it had gained a sort of antique gold look to it.

She was doing something like a homeless person, so I hadn’t noticed, but fatigue had built up on her face. Because of that, her previous luminescence had faded, leaving her face dull.

... She’s aged some.

Seeing her lightly take her seat, I did feel sorry for her.

“W-well, you did a good job this time around. Right, I bought cake. Have as much as you want!”

I handed her the box of cake I’d bought before I arrived. For a moment, I saw the master’s offended expression, but I purposely ignored it.

“Uwah, thank you! I really, really wanted one of these!”

“I see, I see, that’s good!”

“Yes!”

As she opened the box, her teary face lit up, and she directly used her hands to grab the cream-loaded shortcake.

“Haha, slow down. Use a fork.”

“Ehehehe, it would be dangerous if I used a fork.”

“Oh? What do you mean by that?”

“Well you see, this is what I mean!”

Splat. Jessica tossed the cake at my face with all her might. With it being so sudden, I failed to dodge, and the cake stuck fast.

“Hah, hah, hah, that was refreshing!”

Jessica gave an especially gentle voice. I’m sure a full smile was spreading across her face. Of course, right now, my vision was blocked by white cream, so I couldn’t see her smile.

Eventually, the cake lost to the force of gravity, falling onto the table with a splat. But it seems the cream was to remain on my face, and seeing that, Jessica gave a grin.

“Oy, oy,” I took the cream sticking to my nose with a finger, and licked it. “It’s really sweet. You shouldn’t waste food.”

“Shut it. I was just about to waste my life!”

“No, it’s true I’m at fault for not properly telling you. But in the first place, you’re a mercenary, right? Mercenaries and dangerous jobs go hand in hand.”

I used a napkin to wipe the cream off of my face. “If you value your life so much, go get insurance.”

“I did. The moment I got back to this country! I bought the most expensive one they had, what are you going to do about this!?”

“I’m telling you I don’t know. That was a result brought about by your rash actions. And isn’t it fine? The next time you face something life-threatening, you’ll get a payout from the insurance company.”

I felt there was still some cream on my face, but there was no point paying any further mind to it, so I gave up. I retrieved the cake that had flopped onto the table, and returned it to its box.

“On to business...”

“There’s still some on you,” said Jessica, as she leaned across the table, and touched her index finger to my face. White cream stuck to her small finger.

Ager putting it in her mouth, “It’s sweet! Seconds please!” she declared.

“There’s none left.”

“Eeh? Why!?”

“Isn’t that your fault?”

Jessica gave a depressed look alongside a, “Awww,” so I reluctantly, truly reluctantly placed in an order for a short cake.

With brisk movements, the master brought out a short cake from behind the counter. Somehow, it looked tastier than the cake that had just collided with me.

“Wow, thank you! Ah, but since you’re so stingy Mr. Daniel, you plan to split the cost, don’t you!”

... Oh shut it.

“It’s my treat, I’ll pay. You did your best.”

“Ehehehe, I sure did.”

Seeing her munch down the short cake, I ordered a coffee and took a sip.

“So,” I judged the time when she was in good enough humor, and cut to the main topic.

“Could you show me the pictures you took in the Dark Forest?”

Pictures (1)

“Yeah, it really is sweet!”

Jessica smirked up to her eyes, stuffing her cheeks with the cake. Using a fork with her right hand, she rustled through a leather bag with her left, before saying, “Found it!”

She placed a digital camera dirtier than when I gave it to her on the table.

“What about the other?”

On my question, Jessica rustled her brow as she answered.

“It’s broken, remember?”

“I don’t mind. There’s something I want to check into.”

“Got it,” Jessica answered, as she took the broken camera out of her bag.

Unlike the digital camera, the film camera was more broken than I thought. Its lens was split, with cracks down it, showing red and blue and yellow cords from within.

“What’s with it, did it explode or something?”

“That it did.”

Jessica took another gulp of cake. Then, “Hack, hak, w-ww-wwater please,” she started choking, downing a cup of water with teary eyes.

... What a noisy fellow.

“Hack, hack. Ah... um, what were we taking about again?”

“The camera. Where did it explode?”

“Ummm, right, right. As I told you, it exploded when I tried investigating the inside of the house as you asked me to.”

I recalled the contents of yesterday’s call. “When you tried taking a picture?”

“Yes, that’s right. The moment I tried taking a photo inside the house, bang! And that’s all she wrote. It really was surprising!”

Perhaps she was trying to reenact the explosion, she made a fist with a right hand, and as she called out, 'Bang!' she opened her spread wide to match.

"Hmm, I'm glad you weren't hurt."

"Oh, you're actually worried!? You're surprisingly kind."

"Naturally. I'm a lawyer, you know."

When I tried acting cool, Jessica showed no reaction besides a few blinks of her eyes.

Unable to stand the bizarre silence, I eventually said, "So what happened to the film?" pointing out what wasn't in the camera anymore.

"The film was ruined too. Look!"

Jessica placed the film reel that had lost its original form on the table. I took it, and held it to the light.

The lamp from the ceiling showed through it. After locking my eyes on it for a while, I saw a black line through each frame of the film as if something had cut through it.

"What's this?"

"I don't know."

Jessica gave an immediate reply. It really was a sound question. I'd never seen something like this before.

"It's something like a ghost photo."

"Eh~, quit it. I'm not good with that sort of thing."

Her expression of great delight upon eating cake suddenly turned pale.

I ignored her, and looked at the digital camera next. Aside from the dirt, it looked normal, and it seems the video data was preserved without a problem.

I brought up the images on its screen. When I purchased it, there wasn't anything particular on it, so I checked one by one from the oldest data. There, the first picture was Jessica's face up close. I could almost see up the holes of her nose.

“Oy, don’t play around.”

“Urk, I’m sorry.”

I continued through a more pictures of Jessica’s idiotic-looking face, and just when I was getting sick and tired of it, an old house came up.

“Ah, that’s it. That’s the one! I found that house in the middle of the forest!”

Leaning her body across the table, Jessica pointed at the picture and explained, but that wasn’t something she had to go out of her way to say. I knew well enough this was the house I was looking for.

There were thickly lined trees around, and because of the branches that grew thick beyond the second floor, I couldn’t see the rest, but there was definitely a dark house with a heavy atmosphere there.

There were small sturdy latticed windows by the supposed front door, and of them, a single one was broken.

The second photo was inside the house, and just as I’d heard in yesterday’s phone exchange, it was miserably filthy.

The spider webs extending from the ceiling were large and thick, making their way all the way to the ground, it was as if they were single pillars.

Dust was piled like mountains along the ground, the household goods deteriorated away and broken.

... That place is definitely abandoned. That was my impression upon seeing the screen.

The images continued a while, all showing pretty much the same thing. But the last one alone showed something strange.

It was a crystal just large enough you could grasp it in your fist. Regardless of the rubbish piled around it, that amber crystal wasn’t tainted in dust, simply letting off a brilliant and dubious light.

There were two crystals. Perhaps there were three before. I say that because the crystals were precious placed on golden pedestals, and there were three pedestals in all.

... One's missing.

"Hey, about this photo...

"Ah, you noticed after all! As expected of a lawyer!"

After I showed her the photo, she happily stuck her hand into her leather bag, making a rustling sound.

And she took something out.

"Tada, it was so pretty I took them back with me!

Jessica placed two amber colored crystal balls on the table, without the slightest care or restraint, she tossed them onto it.

... Thud was the sound they made. I took the two crystals in hand, and looked over them.

... Where was it? I get the feeling this wasn't the first time I'd seen them.

I get the feeling I saw something just like them in the past. But I can't remember, but I did feel they were related to the case, so I stole them from Jessica. Because of that, I ended up ordering her another cake.

Pictures (2)

After I looked through every photo on the digital camera, I put away both the digital and film cameras in my bag. To make sure not to damage anything, I put them in vinyl bags I had prepared beforehand, and filled the gaps with a towel.

“Hmm? Mr. Daniel, is that everything?”

On Jessica’s question, I let out a sigh as I answered.

“Yeah, thanks. I learned quite a bit.”

Really, I didn’t learn anything, but let’s thank her for now. There, Jessica forced her cheekful of cake down the back of her throat with water, took a deep breath, and held out her right hand.

“What?”

“Ehehehe. Oh, you know. I’m asking for my payment, of course.”

“Ah, I can’t give you that yet.”

“Eeeh!? Why’s that!?”

Raising a cry, Jessica stood from her booth seat. She was probably holding back her anger, but seeing the twitching movements of her green hair, I honestly felt afraid.

“I need to send this camera in for examination. It’s not like I’m doubting you, it’s because it’s a piece of evidence that’s going to be submitted in court. I need a certificate that says these photos were undoubtedly taken in the Dark Forest.”

“I see. That’s irrelevant to me.”

“Oh, but it is. In the first place, you weren’t even able to find the client’s house, were you?”

“Urgh! That’s true, but... I mean, I was lost, and with my level of skill, any more exploration would really be impossible, and...”

As she headed into the latter half, her words gradually became smaller, finally giving a powerful “But still!” She tried to add something after that, but I

interrupted her.

“Don’t be so hasty. It’s not like I’m saying I won’t pay you. In the first place, I already gave you an advance payment of fifty thousand. Why not trust me a bit?”

Jessica complained, “I already used that... rather, I feel somewhat cheated.”

“Then do you want to come with me?”

I invited Jessica.

“To where?”

“That should be obvious, to the magic theory research lab.”

Her face was as if a question mark was floating above her head. Of course, I myself didn’t know exactly what sort of place it was either.

For the magic theory research lab was a tale of these passed ten-odd years. It was set up as a research institute under the government’s national police agency by people specializing in crimes committed through magic, and experts in criminal psychology.

A similar agency called the forensics lab also existed, and that one focused on forensic medicine, engineering, chemistry, and writing analysis in its research.

While their topic of study differed, both were research institutes under the main branch of the police, and they’d often do joint investigations, the driving force who supported the police investigation from the shadows. That sort of thing.

Both labs had access to the highest level of technology the country could offer, and especially in recent years, the entrance of investigation through magic parsing was garnering attention from the world.

... Magic parsing. After the first hearing ended, I looked into it aside from the case.

What I learned was that, by using magic, there would always be a trace left at the scene, apparently.

And a trace left behind once would never go away, whether ten or a hundred

years passed, you could pick up the same data as if it had been used at that instant.

This was different from fingerprints, or blood, or hair samples. Give fingerprints a week, and you'll lose their pattern, and DNA samples were easiest to take when the blood was fresh.

By the way, even after hair is plucked, it's surprisingly tenacious in its will to live. The reason hair grew a few millimeters to centimeters after being cut was because the cells were still alive.

Anything with shape would eventually break. A broken sample had little value to serve as evidence. But evidence collected through magic parsing was different.

Regardless of time, with magic parsing that could always pick up fresh data, unsettled cases, and cases of centuries ago could be brought to light, making a new key to cornering culprits.

The other day. There was something that bothered me on my phone exchange with Jessica.

The moment she entered the house she found in the Dark Forest, the call was suspended. Even when it was a satellite phone that could supposedly be used anywhere in the world.

In a place without electricity or gas or water, I couldn't find any normal reasons a satellite phone wouldn't work. Excluding magic, of course.

And... I looked at my bag. There was the broken camera I'd gotten from Jessica.

The camera was also strange. Why did it explode?

The camera I bought wasn't junk. I'll admit it was cheap, but I chose out a considerably good brand name.

What's more, the test shots Jessica took before the Dark Forest, or rather her selfies came out without a problem.

Yet once she entered that strange house in the woods, it exploded?

It was too put together to be a coincidence.

... It's time for some magic parsing.

I stood from the sofa. Jessica made upturned eyes as she stared at me.

"It's time to settle something. Do you want to come along?"

"... I'll come."

Jessica made an anxious face as she muttered, "I kinda want to see."

"Ah? Did you say something?"

"I said I kinda wanted to see."

Jessica left the café with swift feet. After paying the check, I went outside, to find Jessica doing some stretching exercises there.

"What sort of person is your client?"

For a moment, I thought of how to play it off, but I somewhat hesitated to lie.

"She's a girl around your age."

... I see, Jessica gave a rare blunt mutter.

Magic Theory Lab (1)

It's rarely the case the relationship between attorney and police is severed. Even as a civil attorney, the police often became trouble.

When I was working for Boss Natasha, she was often in charge of criminal cases, and I frequently had to go make discernment requests to the forensics lab.

And after going independent from her office, making myself out to specialize in civil cases, that relationship did not end. More than that, when I got around to civil cases, my relation with forensics became even deeper.

I mean, the crime lab could do everything from blood analysis to sperma tests; from judging car crashes, to analyzing security camera feed. They'd even confirm the authenticity of wills, they'd do a wide variety of discernments.

Even if they were civil proceedings, the essence of the trial didn't differ much from criminal cases. Both of them were worlds where evidence did the talking. Whereas in criminal cases, the police would gather evidence, in civil cases, I had to investigate it all myself, so there was actually more to do.

The forensics lab was a department of the police, running on our taxes. Meaning it was a public service. Naturally, whether it be attorney or civilian, anyone could make an authentication request.

To make such a request, you either had to mail, call, or go to their window and make an appointment beforehand.

Once a suitable appraiser for the request was determined, you just had to pay the request fee. With such a trivial thing, the country would use the finest of analysis equipment, and you could obtain information with exceedingly high validity as evidence.

I explained the above to the one dozing off next to me on the leather-covered sofa of police headquarters.

Jessica let out a yawn, "So basically, Zzzz... ggah."

“Don’t sleep.”

I pinched her nose. Perhaps unable to breath, her face turned pink, and she started making a face of anguish, eventually crying, “Ith hurths!” and opening her eyes.

... I’m glad she bit her tongue there.

I sent an insincere smile to the detectives and police officers hurrying to and fro the tidy corridor, as I lightly pat my chest.

“Oy, keep it down.”

“Whose fault do you think that is!? I couldn’t breathe there!”

“Then stay awake. Whose sake do you think I’m explaining things for?”

Jessica rubbed her bloodshot eyes. “I mean, I was bored,” she said dispirited.

“And you have business with the magic theory lab, right? Why are you telling the extended tale of the forensics lab?”

“I mean, I’ve never used this place before. It’s my first time, so I don’t know the standard.”

... Well, I’m sure they’re something similar.

As we were randomly discussing such a thing. “Is there a Lockhart here?”

As if not quite used to letting out words, I was called by an overly husky voice.

Looking in its direction, I saw a woman who looked as researcher-ish as could be.

There were some black spots on her worn white lab coat, and she wore leather shoes leagues away from any brand name.

It wasn’t to Jessica’s level, but the black hair that reached her shoulders was rife with bedhead, yet regardless of that, there were large bags under her eyes implying an actual lack of sleep.

Her pigment was pale, a person whose face was so thinned down she wore a skeletal air.

“Um...” in a voice I couldn’t feel any life from, the skeleton woman went on.

“Could it be I said something rude? Rather, you’re Lockhart the lawyer, right? I’m not very good at dealing with people, so perhaps I might unknowingly say something rude, but I don’t have any particular ill will, so please pay it no mind.”

“Ah, no I should be the one apologizing. I dazed out for a moment there.”

I hurriedly stood from the sofa, handing over my business card. With her pale fingers, the labcoat woman took the card and said, “Ah, you’re Lockhart the lawyer after all. That’s good, I thought I was mistaken for a minute there.”

“Ha ha ha hah, hah, hah... I’m sleepy,” she raised an eerie laugh, letting out a sigh at the end.

“Um, are you in bad health?”

“No, that’s not it. Please pay it no mind. It’s just from the moment I was born, this body has never done any exercise. So even the slightest things are just really a pain. Do you think they’ll develop artificial muscle anytime soon? The human body really is inconvenient, don’t you think?”

“Eh, um, I dream they will someday.”

As Jessica hesitated on the sudden swing of topic, she still managed to infer the mood, and give a response

“Ah, I forgot.”

On those words, Jessica’s tactfulness was blown away into the abyss where it disappeared in the mist.

“I’m a chief researcher of the magic theory lab. My name’s Samantha Warrick. I thank you for making a request to us on this occasion. I don’t really understand lip service, so I’d like to get to the main topic at once... hah, hah, the air here is thin. Anyways, let’s go to the lab.”

Professor Samantha made a clattering creepy smile, her movements looking terribly shaky and painful. Without blinking her eyes once, the skeletal woman looked between me and Jessica, before turning back and walking off.

... Is she telling us to follow?

To be honest, I’d rather not be with someone like that. Looking to my side,

Jessica's face was convulsing, and it looked as if she was regretting having come here.

I let out a sigh. "Let's go," I said, as I followed behind Samantha.

Magic Theory Lab (2)

Samantha Warrick continued walking hunched down the well-polished hallway of linoleum.

I'm not a holder of a posture good enough to say anything to others, but Samantha's stoop was even greater than an elderly old woman's.

Despite that, she stuck out her chin with her dangerous face, slowly walking bowleggedly, so from a glance, I could only see a small-time city thug.

... If she wasn't wearing a lab coat, she'd just be a pain.

Or so I thought, as I walked up beside her. "Um," I called over.

"There's something I want to ask...!"

"Sshh, please wait."

Holding up a pale finger, she urged me to keep quiet.

"The research lab is separate from police headquarters, so we're about to head outside."

"Yes... and?"

"There's loads of CO₂ outside. I'm no good with it."

"What?"

"I have a constitution susceptible to CO₂ poisoning. I stop my breathing whenever I go outside, so could you not talk to me?"

"... That's, um, what am I to say..."

Taking a backward glance at my confusion, Chief Researcher Samantha took out a portable oxygen tank from her lab coat, putting the mask to her mouth as she mumbled some things that had yet to become words, urging us on with gestures to follow.

... She didn't stop breathing.

No, I don't think that's the problem...

There are various things I'd like to point out, but to each his own, and I kept to myself. I listened to the unfamiliar wheezing sound of oxygen flowing as I walked beside the chief researcher, bathed in the inquisitive glances of others.

By the way, Jessica was twenty meters behind, taking an attitude as if she was completely irrelevant to us.

Police headquarters had been established quite a while ago, and while both its interior and exterior held a dilapidated feel, the magic theory lab erected beside it had a popping façade, really exhibiting the cutting-edge-research-institute aspect of it.

There was a round dome in the very center, with multi-story rectangular buildings sandwiching it on both sides. The dome's exterior was one to make me suspicious of just what sort of research was being carried out within.

Besides the asphalt road around the institute, there was a well-trimmed green lawn, with researchers in similar white coats to Samantha sprawled out over it, or sitting on benches, eating their meal and doing whatever else they pleased.

Having come this far, the inquisitive glance from before had disappeared, and at times, some researchers would call out amicably to Samantha.

... Was she famous around here?

Every time her name was called out, she'd shift her eyes, and give a small nod as she leaked a strange voice from her mask. But from what I could see, it seems that was how she normally behaved around here.

Entering the magic theory research lab, I witnessed a complete design change from the polished outside. Without any unnecessary flair, with bare concrete and machinery scattered, it was a lobby with a bloodthirsty air.

Samantha fixatedly confirmed the door was closed, before finally removing her mask, and moving her light purple lips.

"My lab is on the second floor. Follow."

Magic Theory Lab (3)

Riding the elevator, we were led to a lab on the second floor. Next to the lab door was a touch panel displaying the weather, and Samantha began imputing what looked to be an identification number into it. The door's red light changed to green, and with a sound, it slid open.

Perhaps the building's heating system was operational, as the place was filled with a lukewarm air, but a pleasantly cool current leaked out of Chief Researcher Samantha's laboratory, making me shake for a moment.

"Ah, sorry. My lab is set a little colder than other peoples'"

"I-is that so?"

"Yes, because I'm... for now, come in."

... Say the rest. You've made me curious.

Once we reached the second floor, perhaps she was no longer of others' eyes, as I could hear Jessica following behind with her quick feet as she entered the lab without any particular questions.

"Ah, it's true, it's kinda cool. But strangely enough, it isn't cold."

"There are a few dangerous chemicals left around here. I don't want to raise the temperature by much."

... Does she have any explosives around?

A step into the lab, and I could somewhat grasp the reason. The interior was as lab-like as you'd expect, with wires and cords running orderly along the floor, connecting to all sorts of expensive-looking equipment.

The machines flashed red and green lights, and above one was a beaker full of liquid of peculiar color.

There were a few desks in the lab, but all of them had experimental tools placed on them, and finding space to walk around was a bit of a trial.

Looking in the back of the lab, there was a sofa just about big enough for one

person to sleep. A pink blanket was crumbled in a corner of it. I'm sure that's where this skeleton-like woman slept.

"You can take a seat."

Regardless of her unhealthy body, Samantha proceeded into the depths of the lab with light feet. Looking closely, there was a slight space between the cords extending left and right, and if you tread through them, you'd be able to make your way around well enough.

... It was hard to walk.

As I was put hard to the task, Jessica skipped around the gaps to the lab's inside, eventually finding a pipe chair, and taking a seat.

"Wow. Um, Professor..."

"Samantha is fine."

Samantha carried a beaker over to a machine two meters high distilling a black substance. She placed the beaker on it and pushed a red button. From a transparent tube, the black liquid started to glug out, and fill the insides of the beaker.

"It's coffee."

Samantha said it as if it were natural. "Young lady, do you want coffee?"

"U-um, I, well, I'm not good with bitter, so coffee's a bit..."

"Oh, then would you prefer cocoa?"

"Yes! I won't drink it if it ain't cocoa."

There, Samantha produced a new beaker from her equipment, and placed it on the machine. She pressed a different from before

The transparent tube expelled something again. This time, a distinctly sweet scent drifted over.

"Here."

"Yes?"

As Samantha rudely pushing out the beaker, Jessica gave a confused voice.

“It’s cocoa.”

“... Oh really?”

I could see her hair twitch.

“You like sweet things right?”

“W-well...”

“What’s wrong? If you don’t drink it quickly, it will get cold.”

It was a husky voice without any ambition, and yet she had a strangely pressuring manner. In the end, losing to the pressure that demanded a yes, Jessica took the beaker. “Thank you.”

“Would the lawyer prefer coffee?”

“No, I’m not thirsty, so don’t mind me.”

When I said that, Jessica made some sorrowful eyes at me, but I pretended not to notice.

“I see. How unfortunate.”

Now can we really say it was? And is what you pour into these beakers really coffee? For now, I’m pretty sure the right answer is not to drink.

I witnessed Jessica grow desperate and press the beaker to her mouth. The next moment, she yelled, “Ick!” and spat it out, so I was even more convinced.

Without paying Jessica the slightest heed, Samantha approached a white machine, and operated something with one hand.

“That is?”

“An oxygen concentrator. When the carbon dioxide level in the air gets too high, I faint, so I’ve always got to keep the concentration low.”

“T-that must be rough.”

“Yeah, I think I already told you.”

Jessica spoke as she wiped her mouth with a handkerchief, “An unhealthy dependence on oxygen?”

“... You think there’s anyone out there who isn’t dependent on oxygen?”

For now, I tried retorting, but I did feel Jessica's expression had hit near the mark.

"I've always been frail. Walking outside was a hassle."

She slowly put the beaker to her mouth, and sipped the coffee. As her expression didn't really change along the way, it seems the coffee wasn't particularly bad.

... Though its appearance was off.

Perhaps she was an oddball. Was she really okay like this? Perhaps sensing my anxiety, or purely by chance, "I'm frail, so I decided to do my research properly," she said.

"I have an inborn shut-in nature. It's troublesome to go outside, and I hate moving my body. So while I was looking for a job where I didn't have to go out, I found myself here."

"Hmm, then it's your life's calling."

Jessica said it with a carefree expression, but I have to say... she was being sarcastic.

But it didn't seem Samantha herself had noticed as she replied, "It is."

"By the way, are there any other researchers here?"

"There are."

She continued on in an extremely painstaking tone. How should I put it, perhaps any line longer than a line of notebook paper was as labor-intensive as a full marathon for this person.

"There are two other chief researchers. And a deputy chief, so there are four in all."

"Eh? But I saw a lot more outside."

"They're still technicians. Something like apprentices. The plan is to make splendid researchers out of them."

... I do hope that works out. It'll make it easier for me, or so Samantha said something I couldn't tell was a wish or a goal.

“When the facility’s so large, don’t you think that’s a little insufficient?”

“There’s no helping it. In the first place, the magic theory lab itself is a research institution that’s only just been set up. I myself am working out of my major.”

“Eh? Then what were you doing before?”

“Psychology. But even if I say that, I don’t mean the mentality of humans. I was researching the different psyche of magicians and witches and demi-humans galore.”

... So that’s why I’m knowledgeable. About magic. She added on, as if she saw her current job as a sort of extra.

“Lawyer Lockhart.”

When I wondered if this person was alright, Samantha suddenly began talking about Claudia.

“I’m the one who analyzed your defendant. So besides the appraisal, I think I can be of some more help.”

Her purple lips touched the beaker. Once she had drained it to last drop, “But for now, let’s start the appraisal,” she declared.

Professor Samantha's Appraisal (1)

"Magic... leaves a residue."

Perhaps lacking oxygen, her breathing grew rough as Samantha moved her purple lips.

"As a matter of fact, in our world, that we call magic is still an elusive unknown territory... borrowing the words of the faithful, magic is a grace given to us by god, apparently."

... Fuu, tires, she let out a painstaking grumble.

Even so, from her mindset as a pro researcher, she lifted her hair, and continued on with a sigh mingled in.

"All we can study is the principle and rules of magic. Even if we know how to use magic, we can't answer what it is."

"Meaning you don't know anything?"

Giving up making my way through the messy lab, I leaned my back against a wall and asked.

"Isn't it dangerous for such a thing to be used as a daily commodity?"

"If that's how you want to put it, using electrical appliances is dangerous, and riding airplanes is dangerous as well."

She answered my question without any stagnation. Perhaps she had been asked the same thing before.

"Even when humanity knows electricity flows from positive to negative, we can't answer what it is and where it came from. Even if we know how to get an airplane in the air, when you really get down to it, we don't know the specific reason that mass of iron flies."

"Eh?"

Jessica's face stiffened. Come to think of it, she had just ridden an airplane yesterday, that girl.

“The laws of physics are extremely simple and clear,” without showing any interest in Jessica’s surprise, Samantha continued on. “But why do those laws work? That reason is still a mystery. Call it science, but there are still plenty of fields left in the dark.”

“When we know the principle behind how a hard disk records information, why can a person’s cells store it as well? The mechanics of memory are rife with mystery. The darkness of the human body is a deep one. Magic is even darker, and more mysterious... magic is the occult, a hidden science.”

Samantha touched her mouth to the beaker. The black liquid flowed from her purple lips to the depths of her throat.

Once it was emptied again, she refilled it. When her face was deathly ill looking as it was, just how much did she like coffee?

“Magic parsing is currently the sole scientific means of cleaning up that occult realm. There are many things we can learn by it. In specific circumstance, through magic parsing... well, first off, we can tell if matters can be explained with modern science, or it was a phenomenon tied to magic.”

“That means...” means what? I didn’t really know what I was supposed to ask.

Narrowing her eyes with deep bags, Chief Researcher Samantha continued on. “Even if a magical phenomenon did occur, there’s no guarantee it was brought about by magic.”

She moved her eyes, and looked at Jessica as she spoke.

“For example, the sword that young lady over there has. From what I can see, it’s a flame sword flamberge, but...”

“Heh... oh me? Ehehehe, what could it be?”

Surprised at suddenly being nominated, Jessica’s half-asleep eyes snapped open as she straightener her spine.

“That’s a scam weapon that was popular around five years ago. That sword definitely can’t burn anything, so don’t rely on its power too much.”

“E-eh!? That’s got to be a lie, I mean, I mean I saw it! Mr. Legendary Magic Swordsman used this sword to burn through a whole tree!”

“That is a classic case of fraud.”

She sipped her coffee some more. Perhaps to cut this conversation part-way, and to give her body a bit of rest, it was a performance she was putting on.

“I’m only guessing here, but that burnt tree wasn’t something growing in the forest, but something that had been felled, right?”

“Well... yes.”

“Truth is, around five years ago, a certain scam became popular. It was called the, ‘yes it burns’ scam.”

I hadn’t any idea what to say. That name was likely tacked on by someone in the national police agency, but how should I put it, they were clearly expressing how stupid it was.

“The trick behind the ‘yes it burns’ scam is extremely simply. First you prepare a huge log stuffed with gunpowder. You place it somewhere with lots of people, and cut at it with a completely ordinary sword. The log bursts into flames, the gunpowder ignites and blazes grandly, leaving nothing but black cinder in the end. Surprising the audience, the swindler declares, ‘This mysterious flame sword flamberge, it’s on sale, but I’ll only give it to five special folks!’... he says.”

“... Eh? Why do you even know his lines?”

On Jessica’s voice of disarray, I turned my face to her. Making sure she couldn’t see, I laughed in concern.

“A magic weapon that can burn whatever it cuts. If it’s something so rare, I don’t mind paying a large sum for it. There were quite a few people who thought so. Just how many idi... victims did this ‘yes it burns’ scam claimed?”

In the middle of her explanation, she took a glance at Jessica, paused, and revised ‘idiot’ to ‘victim’. Of course, that was just adding fuel to the fire.

“B-but...! When I tried cutting something, it definitely did get a little singed!”

“Was the sword’s seller nearby?”

“He was! Why do you know that!?”

... I pitied Jessica a bit. Please, just don’t say anymore. It’s painful to watch.

“The slightly-clever part of the, ‘yes it burns’ scam is that its swindler properly follow through for his idio... victims.”

Samantha said something that didn’t follow through for Jessica at all.

“The truth is, the swindler. He was a magician who could use ignition magic. He used magic when he lit the gunpowder. He would hide in the shadows, and secretly ignite whatever his customers tried to cut, leaving a burn mark.”

“Hmm, then the magic wasn’t in the sword, but the person using it.”

“Exactly. Around half a year ago, a victim made an appraisal request for magic parsing. When they submitted a sword just like the one in that young lady’s hands for analysis, there wasn’t the slightest particle of magic detected in it. But the cinders at the scene retained a trace of ignition magic being used.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Samantha noisily sipped her coffee. Was there some strange drug or something in that drink?

“The magic particles detected in the log matched the pattern of particles we found in the blood sample of the swindler we arrested. That became the deciding factor in court, and the swindler spends his life in prison.”

Hanging her head heartbroken, Jessica lightly mumbled, “My scholarship...”

Just what do you think a scholarship is supposed to be, I shouted in my heart as I looked at the researcher.

“I did the appraisal for it. Has that cleared your doubts away, Lawyer Lockhart?”

... Of course, I told her.

Professor Samantha's Appraisal (2)

"About the item for appraisal I turned in beforehand..."

Chief Researcher Samantha lifted up a vinyl bag on her black desk. In it was the evidence I submitted at the reception window of police headquarters.

"First, about this film camera. It's been mostly destroyed, rendering it impossible to use. If serviced, we may be able to restore it. What do you want to do?"

"No, I'm fine."

I gave a courteous refusal. It's not as if I submitted it for appraisal because I wanted the camera serviced.

"Is that so. Then I'll start with reporting the appraisal results on this film camera."

"Wait, the appraisal's already done?"

I was surprised. Not much time had passed since I submitted the evidence to the reception desk.

"If it's just a simple test, it doesn't take much time," she shoved her hands into the pockets of her lab coat, sending sleepy eyes my way. "If you want more detailed results, you'll have to wait a week, but... in that case you won't make it for the trial. Do you mind?"

"No, the fast one, please."

I gave a bitter smile. While she didn't look like she thought anything of others at all, it seems she was thinking about her surroundings in her own way.

"I see. Then to get right to it... miniscule as it may be, magic particles were detected from the camera."

"Miniscule?"

"Yes, miniscule. It's nothing rare. Whether it be miniscule or small, magic use doesn't have that large of an influence. And from what I've heard, even if it

exploded, it was only a small one.”

... That’s not true, it was amazing, cried Jessica, but I ignored her.

“But what bothers me more are the particles left on the film rather than the camera. The arrangement pattern on it did not match the magic particle pattern found on the camera.”

“?”

“?”

I’m sure both me and Jessica were making incomprehensive faces. Samantha made a single deep sigh. “Meaning,” she continued on.

“When the camera exploded, there are traces a different magic apart from the explosion was used on the camera film, is how it is.”

After leaving her beaker on the desk, she walked up close to the white board, took a blue pen in hand, and began writing something.

“By the way, if you’re studying, I recommend blue pens over red pens. It lets you establish the memories faster.”

Samantha turned her face away from the white board once, suddenly saying something without any coherence to the matter at hand.

... Perhaps that was a joke? Should I laugh.

As I was mulling over something, Samantha wrote a simple, large ‘A + B’ and ‘B + C’ over the white board.

“The actual formulas are much more complicated, but let’s just use this for simple explanations. If A + B is the magic arrangement pattern of explosive magic, the pattern left on the film would be B + C.”

“So we have to solve for unknowns?”

“Take it like that if you want. In this case, B would be the characteristics of the person, or perhaps thing that cast the magic.”

“Ah, um, meaning while the type of magic used was different, the user was the same?”

“As is so. What we can isolate in magic parsing is the type of magic, and the

object that used it. However, all we can see of either is just the pattern itself, and we can only make conjecture towards what sort of magic or individual it was.”

“What sort of conjecture?”

Samantha moved from the white board, placing her hand on the only clean thing on her desk, a desktop PC.

“This computer contains all the arrangement samples the police have collected to this point. If we find a match among them, that would likely be the identity of the detected magic particles.”

“I see.”

Interesting, I thought. Jessica was probably confused.

“Among magicians, there are some who intentionally rearrange their codes and use their original magics. But once they go that far, you can say it’s within the realm of god. Any magic a standard magician can use exists within this database.”

“Especially,” she continued on, “the arrangement pattern of magicians and witches who committed crimes in the past; they’re all stored here. You can think we can catch them with almost perfect certainty on their second offense.”

I put my question to words. “So what about the pattern left on the camera?”

“Of course, there was one. First off, the magic that blew up the camera. That one was standard explosion magic. An explosive magic that destroys a specific something if it meets a certain set condition, and it’s even used from time to time today.”

“It can be used even without a caster?”

“If there’s the right magic weapon for the job. But that’s impossible in our country. The laws are regulating it. But in countries with loose regulations, even a civilian can obtain a magic weapon capable of casting it.”

The Dark Forest was no-man’s land. So if someone had set a magic weapon in that house, blowing up the camera would be possible, is how it looks.

“But that can’t be said for the other magic.”

Samantha pinched another vinyl bag, one filled with the film, between her fingers.

“A special magic to interfere with the taking of photographs was used on this film. Regardless of whether or not the camera exploded, it is impossible to take any pictures on this film.”

“Really!? That’s good, then it wasn’t my fault I couldn’t photograph anything, right?”

Jessica looked relieved. So I had to say it.

“That’s right, it was all because of magic. Of course, I do hope you using up all the spare film was because of magic as well.”

“Urk... Processor, I think a sleep magic was cast on me. For a while now, I’ve just been getting sleepier and sleepier and... Zzz.”

“Don’t sleep.”

I hit her forehead. It made a louder sound than I expected. “Ow! That hurts!”

“A magic on the young lady? By all means, let me dissect her.”

“Um, more importantly, I’d like to hear the rest.”

As Jessica’s face turned pale at the sudden request, I urged Samantha on.

“Eh? Oh, the film, right. When I looked into the magic particle pattern detected on it, it matched a magic that was popular a while ago.”

“Hmm, and how long would that while be?”

“Let’s see. Probably around fifty years?”

... Hm? Is it a coincidence? That’s right when the demon lord died.

“Since the scientific revolution a hundred years ago, the world’s flow turned to emphasize science over magic. Magic was definitely useful and convenient, but only a fraction of people could use it. Science was different. It was mass produced so even the powerless could apply it, with various industrial goods ushering in the decline of magic, while simultaneously contributing to a greater development of humanity.”

... The public demanded greater convenience.

“To people who couldn’t use it, magic was considered unnecessary. More than that, the mass-produced goods anyone could use held more value. But if that’s how it was going to be, there were people who were greatly troubled. Of course, the magicians.”

“If science advances, the magicians are troubled?”

Jessica asked with a blank expression. Samantha answered, “Of course.”

“The reason magicians were revered was because they possessed a special power unknown to the common man. But alongside the development of technology, the value of magic decreased. Things without a demand will eventually be discarded. Around that time, a magic to oppose technology was born.”

... And this is one of the magics born in that process, Samantha pointed at the film.

“The magic used on this film simply emits x-ray radiation to render film unusable, a completely unnecessary magic to our everyday lives. But it was just the right magic to disrupt the development of science. Alongside the start of scientific revolution, many such magics were born en masse.”

... The once symbols of glory resort to such a thing, they weren’t even a shadow of their former selves. They were a selfish bunch, Samantha answered, her words mingled with a sigh.

Professor Samantha's Appraisal (3)

Perhaps as a science, or from experience...

Whatever the case, it seems the researcher known as Samantha Warrick didn't have a very favorable impression of magic.

... Maybe not magic, but the ones who used it.

She didn't look like the sort of masochist who'd research what she hates. Very strange indeed, while she was a sort of oddball, as a researcher, no as an investigator, perhaps she had quite the eye.

Maybe it's best I don't judge by appearance. My footing will be swept from my under me.

"I understand that a sort of magic was placed on the film camera."

"Rather than the camera, it was the space it entered."

Samantha stared at me. Was she glaring, or just sleepy, I was troubled to determine.

"I said it before, but the item you submitted for appraisal, this film camera. The magic was programmed to blow up any item in a specific place that met certain conditions."

"You can do something that convenient?"

... "Of course you can," Samantha made a smile with her lips as she answered, and "Quite easily," she added on.

"It isn't anything too difficult. Even a magician without proper training can do it if they get the hang of it. I'm not a witch, so I can't say the specifics, but there seems to be a sort of sixth sense only magicians can understand."

"Sixth sense... like a sense for the paranormal?"

"Well, something like that. For example, the sense of sight I have..."

Samantha pointed at her own eyes.

"To someone with eyes, it's easy to understand what sort of thing a sense of

sight is. But did you know? Among the lifeforms that live in the darkness, there are organisms that can know their surrounding information without relying on sight.”

“I’ve heard of such deep-sea fish.”

“Explaining the workings of sight to an organism without eyes is an extremely difficult thing to do. A magician’s sixth sense is the same. A magician’s sixth sense incomprehensible to the common man alone is something that never leaves the realm of speculation.”

She took a sigh. But that wasn’t from her fatigue building up, it looked as if she was discouraged by her own ineptitude.

“To return to the topic at hand. The magic that blew up the camera affects a specific place... as I recall, it happened in a house within the Dark Forest, right?”

“Y-yes, that’s right.”

I looked at Jessica. She was nervously raising her hand. How should I put it, it was as if a student that didn’t usually stand out was holding up her hand as if there was just one thing she had to say no matter what.

“I’m surprised you found it. Based on my memory, the people who made it to the heart of the Dark Forest, and came back alive... there are only around 200 of them.”

... That’s surprisingly high.

“But the people who didn’t come back number over ten times that. Well, if it’s only returning alive, I won’t say the hurdles are too high. It’s a place exaggerated as no-man’s land and a special quarantined region, so it’s definitely dangerous, but if you go at it smartly, it’s on a level where it just might work out or not.”

What a throw-it-to-the-air phrasing.

“What were all my troubles for...”

Jessica’s arm lost strength, as she lowered it and hung her head.

“The explosion and X-ray magic were used as a pair.”

Samantha continued on, “Otherwise, I can’t explain why the digital camera was not destroyed.”

“Digital? Ah, come to think of it, you’re right. Why was the film camera destroyed when the digital camera came out intact?”

“Hmm, let’s see. This is just speculation, but the magic placed on that house is thought to have been cast over ten years ago, at the very least.”

Over ten years, eh. That sounds overly abstract. On the contrary, I wanted to hear the basis for why it wasn’t within the last decade.

“The basis for why it wasn’t in the past decade...” Samantha said as if reading my mind, “is because the digital camera was commercialized around ten years ago.”

“The history of film cameras is a long one. If you want to look at film’s invention, that traces back over a hundred years. Alongside the development of the camera, this x-ray magic became popular among magicians for a while, but it was completely out of fashions ten years ago. Because it has absolutely no effect on digital cameras.”

“Why? Ah, because there’s no point even if it’s hit with x-ray.”

“Right. A digital camera stores to its HDD. Even if explosion magic was cast, as long as you used defensive magic on the HDD itself, the data inside would be protected.”

Defensive magic, huh.

“Then couldn’t you use defensive magic on a film camera?”

“In that case, you’d have to cast a magic to protect against x-rays. If you did something like that... you wouldn’t be able to take photos in the first place.”

... I see. You can’t please everyone.

“The photo-interference magic that once displayed a high effect was taken out in one swoop by the introduction of the digital camera. Technology is always stepping forwards, always evolving. Those magicians with nothing on their minds but spiteful harassment will eventually be weeded out, I’m sure.”

... Well that’s interesting in itself, she said, and while it was really hard to

grasp, she made a small smile.

She's dark... for some reason, that's the sort of impression I had of this professor.

Professor Samantha's Appraisal (4)

"Meaning while there was a magic installed in the house to obstruct photographing with a film camera, there wasn't anything to prevent digital cameras."

"From what I've heard, I believe that's how you can sum it up."

Samantha stared at Jessica. "If that young lady hasn't told a lie, or so it goes."

"I-I haven't told a lie!"

"I guarantee it. She hasn't lied."

"M-Mr. Daniel! I'm really happy right now! You believe in me!"

"Rather, does she look clever enough for that?"

"... Why'd you have to say it?"

Leaving Jessica aside as she pleaded with the eyes of a small animal, "Does it really matter?" I said as I turned back to Samantha.

"Can you identify an era on when that magic was cast?"

"Unfortunately, that will be difficult."

Samantha spoke.

"As you may be aware, magic doesn't decay like food. It doesn't corrode, and sudden as it may sound, it doesn't ferment either. Whether ten or a hundred years go by, magic stays as magic, without any change in shape. At present, identifying an era is impossible."

... At present, huh. I'd like to count on the future, but the trial was tomorrow. There was nothing to be found in relying on a time I never knew would come.

"But from circumstantial evidence, it's possible for a level of conjecture. As I've said, film camera obstruction magic came to fashion fifty years ago, and after that, the opportunities for its use gradually declined, almost nothing being left with the digital camera's rise ten years ago."

"In the first place, in the current age with digital cameras, wouldn't they use a

different magic?”

“Precisely. If they really wanted to hide something, not just film, I’m sure they’d take countermeasures against digital as well. But they were negligent. There’s a possibility that at the time the magic was cast, digital cameras had not yet come to be in the world.”

Possibility, was what it was. Not evidence. But it did sound exceedingly probable.

In truth, the cell phone signal was disrupted as well.

“I sent in the cell phone for appraisal as well, but what about that?”

When I asked, Samantha shook her head. But even so, rather than indicating no, it was as if she were as if she was expression a tremor, a quiver.

“There weren’t any particular magic particles detected on the satellite phone. Even if I say that, if you just want to block phone reception, casting something to block the signal would be sufficient. That would be a magic to prevent any outside signals from reaching a certain region, and nothing cast on the phone itself.”

... It didn’t leave a trace, she said firmly.

“But the possibility is high, right?”

“If it’s just possibilities, there’s plenty room for argument. But there’s nothing decisive.”

She flatly denied it. Seeing how she seemed to be used to argument, perhaps she conducted various exchanges on a daily basis.

... In that case, my only evidence is the camera.

Anyways, there was some sort of magic cast on that ruin. That magic was placed over ten years ago... why was it put there to begin with?

I’m no Samantha, but I thought it was an overly roundabout way to go about it. If they had a secret they didn’t want anyone to know no matter what, I think there would be a cleverer way to go about it.

For example, blowing the entire house to tiny pieces the moment an outsider

came in.

In that case, the house would be blown sky high, and Jessica would have died, but it would actually protect the house's secret.

... There must have been circumstances that prevented it. What? Something they didn't want anyone to know about, but that they wanted to avoid destroying...

What was found in the house was... the crystal ball?

I took out the crystal tucked away in my bag, and handed it to Samantha.

"What's that?"

Samantha brushed aside her hair, a wrinkle visiting her brow.

"It's a crystal found in the black forest. It looked rare, so she brought it..."

"I took it back with me!"

A green tuft of her hair perked up as Jessica said that, so "Yeah, yeah, I'll give you some candy later, so could you keep quiet for now?" I held her back.

Samantha raised her heavy hips, as if she truly hated it from the depths of her heart, but there was no other choice, she stood up, putting on white gloves so as not to leave fingerprints as she took the ball in her hand.

"Yeah, this is out of my area of expertise."

The words lonesomely flowed from her purple mouth.

"Just from what I can see, it contains some magic, but unless we run tests, I won't be able to tell you what sort of magic it is. And..."

She brought the crystal close to her face, and lightly crept the tip of her tongue across it.

"... It tastes salty. This is sweat."

... We have a pervert here.

"Um, was that some sort of appraisal method?"

I tried asking just in case. "No. Don't you ever get the urge to lick something that intrigues you?" Chief Researcher Samantha said bluntly.

... Tasting for poison?

“It’s an exceedingly pretty, transparent amber. A perfect sphere without any distortion. If you had an art appraiser here, there’s no doubt it would be evaluated highly.”

“Hmm, so what’s your appraisal, Professor Samantha?”

“No clue. Art is out of my area of expertise.”

What is it, I was tasting a terrible sense of wasted effort.

Results and Conclusion

“I could never get into art,” Samantha emphasized. “Never could tell where to draw the line.”

... What?

“Fufu. Fufufufu. Kek, hack, hack, I’ve said too much.”

She grabbed a nearby compact compressed oxygen tank, and put the mask to her mouth, taking a deep breath of fresh oxygen.

I think I’ve figured out the mode of life of this strange organism. Professor Samantha liked making dad jokes.

... What a pain.

Raising the deep bags under her eyes, her expression calmed down as she took in oxygen. Perhaps because we were next to police headquarters, I could only see her as some sort of drug addict.

If she weren’t in this lab, I’m sure she’d be questioned. Ignoring the skeletal woman making an elated expression, I put together what I’d learned as a result of this appraisal.

(Jessica) went through so much trouble to retrieve the photos and crystal balls from the Dark Forest.

In the end, we weren’t able to find Claudia’s house, and... perhaps this was an utter waste of (Jessica’s) time.

Even when (Jessica) found herself on the verge of death.

... Thinking about it like that, there was zero actual damage to me. No, I promised to pay her wages, so I guess I’m at a financial loss.

In order to reclaim this loss, I have to win in tomorrow’s trial by all means.

Yeah, yeah. This world runs on money after all

Now then. But now?

Surprisingly enough, there were other people besides Claudia in the Dark

Forest. Claudia didn't say anything, but by the evidence we found, at the very least, over ten years ago, there's no doubt someone was there besides Claudia and her father.

If, if by chance there was someone who delivered Claudia that letter, wouldn't they have to be knowledgeable about the Dark Forest?

From what I heard from Jessica, it wasn't a place any amateur could enter so easily. It seems with a level of skill, someone could live in the forest, but would making way to a specific point be so easy?

... Come to think of it, there was something I noticed.

"Jessica?"

As Chief Researcher Samantha broke into a coughing fit, Jessica rubbed her back to nurse her to health. Rather, how does that person choke on oxygen?

... When looked at from the side, she was an interesting one. I didn't want to be friends with her.

"What is it?"

As Jessica turned to me with a blank face, I asked.

"You were lost in the forest, weren't you? How did you get back?"

"Oh that. I told you, didn't I? I'm good at running."

... Come to think of it, she did say something like that in the interview. So that was true.

"By running, you mean from monsters?"

"That too, but the truth is, I can fly."

"Oh?"

I've heard about it before. Among magicians, there were some who could freely soar through the air, apparently.

"Even if I say that, It's only for five seconds. But in most cases, I can whoosh away in those five seconds."

I tried imagining Jessica flying. I'm sure that restless green hair of hers spun to

create lift.

“If you have an ability like that, why couldn’t you have used it to run away from the monsters?”

“I did! Whenever I flew somewhere, another monster would pop out.”

“Hm, you sure have it rough.”

“Why are you treating it like someone else’s problem!?”

A tuft of her hair stood at attention. It seems it reacts to the voltage released when she was angry. Puffing her cheeks, she began to complain.

“Hmph, it’s because you tricked me that I ended up in such a place, Mr. Daniel. I’ve got scars on my skin now. What will you do if I can’t get married?”

“At the time, I’ll introduce an underclassman of mine. Do you like men of higher education?”

Jessica seriously thought for a moment, before answering, “I love them!”

“Hahaha, you sure are a gold digger. Then will you let me off with that?”

“Yes, very well, I’ll forgive you!”

“... Looks like someone’s having fun.”

Removing her oxygen tank, Samantha let out a sigh. Because of that heavy aura of hers, the fun air dissipated, and went off with the wife and kids.

“How are you feeling?”

On my question, she answered, “I’m fine.” Then, “More importantly, about that crystal...”

“This?”

I held up the crystal ball. Samantha scrunched her brow, narrowing her eyes viciously as she stared fixatedly at it.

“I get the feeling I saw it somewhere quite recently...”

... Where?

“What a coincidence, I also have a feeling I’ve seen it somewhere before. But I can’t remember.”

“Oh, I’ve just remembered. I know what that is.”

Chief Researcher Samantha said quite distinctly.

“Really?”

“Yes, but unless we appraise it, I can’t confirm whether this is the same thing as what I saw before. However, it this crystal really is that...”

... Then it’s exceedingly valuable, she said. And her purple lips closed, as she suddenly went silent.

What’s this? What a worrisome phrasing.

“What’s ‘that’?”

Jessica asked in an innocent voice. As she stared at the crystal with a fascinated expression, I’m sure it’s a question that came out of pure curiosity.

But Samantha’s stern expression had something beyond curiosity.

“I could never get into art.”

Another dad joke? I was honestly fed up, but it seems that wasn’t the case this time.

“But I know what this is...”

Samantha pointed at the crystal. And, “Please make sure to bring it to tomorrow’s trial.”

“Eh, well, um sure, I don’t see why not, but... you know what this is?”

“... The truth is, I was asked to testify in tomorrow’s trial.”

Finishing those words without any pause, when she added on, “By Prosecutor Schaefer,” at the end, her voice stiffened somewhat.

Does she not like her too? That female prosecutor? I wouldn’t doubt it.

“Truth be told, there’s something that person hushed me on. I can cooperate freely on anything besides that matter, but in regards to it, I’m a member of the police force, and I cannot talk about it.”

Unlike how she’d been up to now, her tone was quite strong.

“Whatever the case, you’ll hear it all in tomorrow’s trial. But right here and

now, I cannot answer anything about that crystal ball.”

... That’s all she would say.

After imparting those words, Samantha closed her mouth again. Her attitude conveyed a strong will that she wouldn’t say anything further, and as it all turned out, I wasn’t able to draw any new information out of her.

Daybreak (1)

When I returned from the magic theory lab, the clock had already run passed nine.

I had the feeling I came part of the way with Jessica, but she disappeared at some point, and I hadn't see her since.

... But I guess that's fine.

Lying over the bed in my dim room, I closed my eyelids.

My vision was shrouded in darkness, I couldn't see anything.

November 10th, 11th, 12th...

Westminster Hotel...

A guard attacked on the roof...

A guard who fell into the park...

A crime-scene rife with inadequacies...

The structure of the guard room...

And the missing security guard...

Of course, I did look into the individual known as Andre McHirsh.

No one knows where he went after quitting the security. I tried calling the emergency contact number he submitted to the security company.

But it didn't connect.

After that incident, the third guard disappeared.

One dead, one gone.

So I can't tell. Just who was Claudia supposed to attack?

By the guard shift table, the person who was supposed to patrol on the 10th was Andre McHirsh.

I claimed in the last trial that the security camera footage's dating was off. If

my theory was true, then Claudia appeared in the hotel on the 10th and not the 11th.

Then who she attacked should have been Andre McHirsh, right?

Why did the 11th's guard Hal Anderson die?

Something was strange.

I had seen the security camera footage. From what I could see, the one attacked was definitely Hal, not Andre.

So was Hal instead of Andre actually on guard duty that day?

Why did they do such a thing? Were the two of them acquaintances? No, even if they were, why would they go out of their way to switch?

If they switched up the planned shifts beforehand, wouldn't they need the permission of the security company they belonged to?

To manage the guardroom's surveillance footage, one would have to ride the strictly-secured elevator, and go to the third floor.

Even if they were registered guards, those who weren't registered for the day's shift couldn't go to the third floor.

Meaning... if they wanted to swap shifts, they'd have to call the security company, and get permission so they'd be able to use the elevator.

But the security company hadn't given such permission.

Then should I think there was no shift change after all?

... Good grief, my head's a mess.

There were things I didn't know. In the end, who delivered Claudia the letter?

The most suspicious one was the resident of those ruins in the black forest.

There had to have been someone there before. If I had to suspect someone, that resident was the most suspicious at present.

But while the suspicious individual was dubious, they weren't anything beyond that.

The only thing I learned was that the resident hadn't approached the ruins in

the last ten years.

If he had come any more recently, he should've set up magic for not just film, but digital cameras as well.

And the greatest mystery of the ruins was...

I took the crystal ball out of my bag. With that glimmering amber ball in my hands, I tried holding it up to the light.

What is this? Does Cate know?

"... Huh? I'm missing one."

I'm sure there were two crystal balls, but where did the other one go?

... Not that it matters. I don't need two of the same thing. She did say to bring it to the trial, but she never told me I needed both of them.

And there were three crystal balls originally. We were already missing one from the start.

Daybreak (2) The Darkness of Slumber

The red evening sun sank. The sky was thoroughly dyed in darkness.

Where did the black crows go? Wearing the colors of darkness, that I couldn't catch a glimpse of them at night, was it because they were sleeping alongside the humans...

Or because they had melted into the dark?

The main street usually flourishing with people, for some reason there were few to be found tonight.

... That was better. For me, and to everyone else.

Straying to the side of the main street, I proceeded down an even less popular road, eventually running into a single young girl standing with nothing to do.

The girl wore a yellow coat. At her waist was a large sword unfit for her height.

The flame sword flamberge. Of course, that one wasn't real. It wasn't even a replica.

Once the green haired girl noticed me, a smile spread across her lonesome pale face. And she waved her hand this way.

"Ah, you're finally here! You're late! What were you doing?"

I wave a hand at her.

"My bad, Jessica."

"Hmph, there's something wrong with setting up a meeting in such an uncanny place!"

Jessica half-trotted over. And she spoke, "This time's job really was a hassle."

"Oh really?"

I pretended to be surprised. From the course of events, I had a general idea of how things came to pass, but I felt it would be more interesting if I played the fool.

“Really! In the first place, tracing it all back to the root, it’s all your fault! Since you told me it was a safe job anyone could do easily, I contacted the client at once, but it turned out completely different!”

“Did I say something like that?”

I played it straight.

“You did! Did, did! As a punishment, you have to treat me to dinner!”

... There’s no helping it, said I, Jessica giving a, “Hooray!” as her face lit with joy.

“More importantly, what sort of job was it? Did you find anything interesting?”

On my question, Jessica gave a bashful smile. “Ehehehe.”

“Truth be told, I got something nice, secretly, from the client!”

Tada, making her own sound effect, Jessica took out a crystal ball big enough to sit in her palm from her pocket.

Seeing that, I could feel my mind raise alarm bells.

... That’s no good, my emotions are in a disarray. You’ve got to play calm.

“What’s up with that?”

“Well. The truth is, I found it on the job. It was really pretty, so I took it home with me! It’s a secret from the client, okay? If he finds out, he might not pay my reward.”

“Haha, good grief, you really are a bad girl.”

... A harvest beyond my expectations.

That lawyer. Without any special history, or any rumors about him, he should just be some third rate attorney.

On top of that, a court-appointed lawyer in it for the money. A gathering of folks without a fragment of conviction, trash without motivation of will to back them.

Compared to him, the prosecutor was truly proficient. Nothing to criticize in

her history or achievements. The form she gave as she thoroughly made sport of the defendant was enough to make me smitten.

A talented prosecutor, and third rate attorney. The evidence was all there. The outcome was plainer to see than a raging fire.

So that trial should have ended already.

Yet the result was different.

... It irritates me.

It would be a peeve if the trial continued on any longer. There are various things connecting to me in that forest. Having someone bring back something unnecessary, and dragging up needless enquiries would be a pain.

That's why I purposely introduced this incompetent woman to that lawyer. I was sure it would have ended with this useless mercenary eaten by monsters without a fight.

The lawyer wouldn't be able to find anything, and in the end, with insufficient evidence, the defendant would lose.

That's how it was. That's how it would end. That's how it should be.

But my expectations were betrayed. In quite the pleasant sense.

"Let me have a look."

I spoke to Jessica. After a moment of hesitation crossed her face, "Sure, okay," she responded as she handed the crystal over.

... Yeah, there's no doubt about it. This glimmer, it's the real thing.

The amber crystal ball. So it's come into my hands.

"Hey, don't you think it's really pretty."

"Yeah, I do."

I do. There were three crystals. One's gone. So only two are left. We're one short. But one is enough.

"Thank you."

"Eh?"

Jessica displayed a questioning expression, as her gestures indicated she was waiting for me to say more. But I had no intent to speak any further.

This woman could disappear already.

Splutch. I straightened out my hand, and pierced it through Jessica's stomach.

The texture of her flesh and organs penetrated into my arm. But with only one thrust, my hand had gone straight through her stomach, piercing out of her back.

Blood and meat clew, and hit the wall. A sound as if a water balloon had popped, and its contents burst out.

Jessica opened her eyes wide, her expression indicating she still had something left to say. But what spewed from her expression of anguish wasn't words, but a large quantity of blood.

As if vomiting it out, the blood flowed from her mouth. Because of that, it got on my face.

"How filthy."

I swung my arm, slamming Jessica against the ground.

A splat pierced my ears. Once my piercing left hand was out, it was red all the way to my fingertips. Looking closely, some fleshy bits were stuck to it as well.

Jessica squirmed and twitched on the ground.

Without lending it an eye, I stared at the crystal ball alone.

I put it to my mouth. It tasted like iron. I went on to put it into my mouth, and gulped it down.

A cold sensation crept down my throat. Hah, the preparations are complete.

As I slipped out of the dark alleyway, I saw the dark night sky was beginning to gain a purple tint.

It was about time for day break.

... The trial was to begin.